

Statement by Sen. Chuck Grassley
Committee on Finance
Hearing on Welfare Reform
April 10, 2002

Mr. Chairman, thank you for organizing today's hearing that focuses on work. I am glad for the chance to hear from our very distinguished guests, including Governors Engler and Dean, both of whom are clearly dedicated to the success of welfare reform and to promoting successful work policies.

We are just about six years into the implementation of comprehensive welfare reform. We are fortunate to have successes to point to on many fronts, including impressive gains made from increased work participation.

At the same time, I think it's fair to say that we are still perfecting our national reform efforts. We can and should look at ways to improve access to jobs, job retention, and income gains for individuals leaving welfare. We should also take steps to encourage states to promote policies that strengthen families. We know that financial stress and other challenges of family life present threats to family economic stability.

The President has offered good suggestions on how to enhance policies that strengthen families. He has put forth new ideas for demonstrations to promote healthy marriages as well as improved child support enforcement policies. The President's proposal to make improved child well-being a new, overarching goal provides important guidance as we deliberate over individual policies.

Today's hearing is part of the committee's activities related to the reauthorization of the welfare reform act. The way I see it, our goal for reauthorization is to incorporate improvements into a program that is largely succeeding in its mission. Today's hearing is especially important to our process because it deals with the central theme of work.

As we will hear today, welfare reform varies not only state by state, but community by community. The characteristics of welfare recipients, the availability of jobs, and access to support services such as transportation and child care can differ greatly from one county to the next. In my rural state of Iowa, a high percentage of families on welfare live in rural areas where jobs, transportation, and child care are harder to come by than in the more populated regions of the state.

Our work-centered welfare policies rely on the coordination of jobs, support services, and individuals' willingness to work. The work readiness of an individual can vary dramatically based on one's educational background as well as one's physical and emotional well-being.

In other words, an individual who has a high school diploma and has had work experience at some time is generally more employable - at least immediately - than someone without a high school degree who might also be dealing with a substance abuse problem and/or a mental health problem. Logic tells us that these two individuals will have different work experiences, although

I'd like to believe that both individuals have the potential for finding meaningful employment and providing for a family.

I want to extend my thanks to each of our witnesses for your thoughtful testimony, and I'd like to urge each one of you to continue to dialogue with this committee. Your insights are important and help us to understand the intricate workings of our welfare policies.